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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 002867

SIPDIS

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DOT PASS TO FAA
DAKAR PASS TO FAA REP ED JONES
ROME PASS TO TSA REP JOHN HALINSKI

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SUBJECT: NIGERIA ADC AIR CRASH SHAKES CONFIDENCE IN SECTOR

REF: ABUJA 2830

11. (SBU) Summary. Nigeria's troubled aviation sector suffered another major blow with the October 29 crash of a Sokoto-bound ADC Airlines Boeing 737 aircraft just beyond Abuja International Airport, which killed at least 98 persons. Minister of Aviation Babalola Borishade blamed the crash on pilot error and said ADC's operating license was suspended "indefinitely." North American Airlines' Nigeria country manager predicted that because Nigerian travelers have long memories for aviation tragedies, the ADC crash may cause the airline to go out of business. This crash, on the heels of other serious ones in the past 53 weeks, show the problems within Nigeria's aviation sector are fundamental. End Summary.

12. (U) Nigeria's troubled aviation sector suffered another major blow with the October 29 crash of a Sokoto-bound ADC Airlines Boeing 737 aircraft at Zuba village, just beyond Abuja International Airport and on the outskirts of Abuja. The ADC flight was carrying 101 passengers and five crew members. The crash killed at least 98 persons, including the sultan of Sokoto, the Sokoto State Deputy Governor, three senators, one son of former Nigerian President Shehu Shagari, and other prominent politicians.

13. (SBU) Henry Seymour, North American Airlines (NAA) Country Manager, told a Lagos economic officer that ADC itself will bear the brunt of fallout from the crash, rather than the domestic aviation sector as a whole. Seymour said ADC already was weakened following a November 1996 crash, when one of its jets plunged into a lagoon outside Lagos, killing all 143 persons aboard. The NAA official said Nigerians have long memories for aviation tragedies, will likely avoid flying ADC in the future, and that the most recent crash may spell the end for ADC Airlines.

Aviation Minister Blames the Pilot

14. (U) Minister of Aviation Babalola Borishade reported at an October 30 news conference that a preliminary investigation found the ADC pilot requested permission from the Abuja control tower to take off. The tower controller granted permission but gave a wind report warning of adverse weather, including thunderstorms and lightning around the airfield. Borishade said the pilot disregarded the warning and took off, before crashing fewer than two minutes after takeoff. The minister announced that the Government of Nigeria (GON) had suspended ADC Airlines' operating license "indefinitely."

Aircraft's "Black Boxes" Recovered

15. (U) The local press reported that government officials carried out rescue operations swiftly. Borishade said rescue operations began almost immediately after the control tower lost contact with the ADC aircraft. An official with the Nigerian Accident Investigation and Prevention Bureau (AIPB) later said the GON had recovered the aircraft's cockpit voice recorder and flight data recorder.

Fourth Serious Crash in 53 Weeks

16. (U) The ADC crash was Nigeria's fourth serious one in the past 53 weeks. On October 22, 2005 a Bellview Airlines Boeing 737-200 crashed close to Lagos, killing all 117 people aboard. On December 10, 2006 a Sosoliso Airlines McDonnell Douglas DC-9 aircraft crashed adjacent to Port Harcourt International Airport, killing 107 people. Then, on September 18, 2006 a Nigerian military Dornier 228 aircraft crashed into a mountain in Benue State, killing 13 out of 18 senior military officers aboard.

NTSB Investigation Team Arrives October 31

17. (U) A four-member U.S. National Transportation Safety Board team, including representatives from Boeing and Pratt and Whitney, arrived in Abuja on October 31 to assist the AIPB in investigating the cause of the ADC crash. Also, a U.S. Federal Aviation Authority employee is scheduled to arrive in Nigeria on November 1 to join the NTSB team. The NTSB team leader said the GON had provided him with a copy of the government's findings concerning the December 2005 Sosoliso Airlines crash in Port Harcourt. Embassy Abuja does not yet have a copy of the GON's report.

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Comment

18. (SBU) Compared to Western aviation standards, it is chilling that Nigeria's three catastrophic air crashes killed more than 300 persons total - and involved three different airlines with small numbers of aircraft, in a very small aviation sector. GON officials contended repeatedly after the Bellview crash - and then again after the Sosoliso crash - that Nigeria had achieved significant progress in boosting safety within its domestic aviation industry. The ADC crash demonstrates these claims to be hollow and the problems within Nigeria's aviation sector to be fundamental. Nigeria already has a badly deficient road network and a nonfunctioning rail network. Now, its airline sector continues to exact a high price from those persons who wish to fly within Nigeria and from those who feel they have no choice but to do so. Reforming Nigeria's airline industry will not be fast or easy, and the impending change of national administrations will not aid this process.

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